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ABSTRACT

This report describes graduate courses in the whole language approach offered by Lander College to 10 rural school districts in South Carolina. The whole language approach is seen as a way to meet the educational needs of rural at-risk students. In the first course on the whole language approach, 10 early childhood teachers engaged in workshops on the theoretical and research bases for the whole language movement. Teachers used journals with invented spelling, a shared literature event, classroom response circles, class books, language experience stories, and a message board. At the conclusion of the course, four of the teachers were successfully operating whole language classrooms. Other courses offered to elementary through high school teachers were developed under guidelines from the South Carolina State Department of Education. Teachers in these courses expressed concern about a lack of administrative support for whole language and teacher accountability for skills development, driven by published school test scores. As the teachers participated in courses they became more adept at teaching skills in the context of literature and social conversation. At the secondary level, teachers need to be introduced to the whole language approach as an alternative. They also need to work with new delivery systems involving grouping and cooperative learning. There must also be administrative support of changes in methods and delivery systems. At Landers College a whole language course has been proposed to improve the language skills of its college students. (KS)

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Developmentally Appropriate Whole Language The Whole Way: Addressing the Literacy Problem for At-Risk Students

Students need to feel that school is a place where their needs for fun, freedom, power and love are being met. Yet, many rural, at-risk students feel instead, helpless, powerless, fearful and threatened. They engage in negative thinking and have an external locus of control which has been well developed over a period of years in both homes and schools. These attitudes and beliefs carry over into their acquisition of communication skills as well. Perhaps it is time to examine language acquisition and use in these rural and disadvantaged areas and offer alternatives. Whole language the whole way offers such a choice. In the words of Mark Twain, " A habit cannot be tossed out the window. It must be coaxed down the stairs a step at a time." Such is the recommended developmental approach which must begin with early years and continue through postsecondary education. Not only will students learn through whole language, teachers must develop the necessary attitudes and knowledge base. What follows is one small college's response to the issue of literacy through the whole language approach or whole language the whole way.

Rationale

Lander College is a publicly supported, fully accredited, four-year college of liberal arts and sciences located in the Piedmont section of South Carolina not far from the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. The seven counties it serves are Abbeville, McCormick, Saluda, Edgefield, Laurens, Newberry and Greenwood. The demographic characteristics of the service area provide a profile of the students since many are drawn from rural areas of South Carolina and the Piedmont region particularly. These counties are located in the northwestern region of the state. The population of the state is 40% rural, and 45% of the public school students are minority (Hodgkinson, 1990). There are no major interstate highways reaching into this area and lack of a comprehensive public rural transportation system is a restrictive barrier to a large segment of the citizens in this region. The remote location of this service area partly accounts for the cultural and economic deprivation of the families who live here.

The service area is comprised of a substantial number of low income minority and disadvantaged citizens who have not been served

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by traditional postsecondary institutions and who have unusually great educational needs. Average per capita income lags dramatically behind the average for the Southeast. In fact, the state of South Carolina ranked 41st in per capita income in the nation in 1988 (Hodgkinson, 1990).

Educational needs are apparent when reviewing the number of adults who completed only 0-8 years of formal education. For those 25 years old or older, their percentages range from a low of 17% in Greenwood to a high of 21% in nearby Laurens. The U. S. Bureau of Census further shows the median years of education for those 25 years old or older to be 12.1. This is an indication of an educational lag in meeting the needs of rural, at-risk students in this geographical area.

The trend of high school dropouts is continuing according to the South Carolina State Department of Education rankings by district, 1988-89. Dropout percentages range from a high of 5.5% in one of the Greenwood districts to a low of 1.9 in one of the Laurens districts. Yet, these percentages represent a loss of great magnitude when translated into lost human potential. The authors believe that the whole language approach to literacy is one way to prevent such loss.

Theoretical Foundations

The term "whole language" was first used in the 1970's to describe an integrated system to support children's language learning (Goodman, 1991). Researchers such as Jerome Harste, Ken Goodman and Carolyn Burke, were using the words "whole language" to explain a different approach to the reading process (Harste, 1991). The process combined the best of what is known about how children learn, how best to teach children and how language learning evolves. Whole language, therefore, is a composite of several theories.

Piaget's constructivist learning theory influences the manner in which whole language theorists view the learner. Piaget described the learner as involved in a process of development (De Vries & Kohlberg, 1987). The process is enhanced by activities and persons in the environment. As a result of this interaction between the environment and development, children construct knowledge naturally because they are searching for meaning in order to make sense of their world.

This search for meaning, according to Frank Smith (1989) is greatly dependent upon how children are taught. Smith is critical of using reading programs (e.g. basals, computer software, activity kits) to teach literacy because these trivialize the reading process and make learning to read and write purposeless. Even more serious, these methods produce the "expectation that learning something is

difficult, punishing or unlikely..."(p. 50). If we are going to produce truly literate citizens, we need to return the teaching of reading and writing to teachers and children where it becomes an exercise in pleasure (Smith).

Ken Goodman (1986) reminded us that whole language teachers implement scientific theories based upon research in the areas of language development, linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and education. He also reminded us that the humanistic and scientific bases of whole language are mutually supportive.

Sara Lundsteen (1989) went on from this position to articulate her ideas for building bridges to reading and writing with informational uses of whole language. She built upon Goodman's premise to develop her model which illustrated the bridge between comprehension and composition, which highlighted exposition and which described ways in which teachers could build bridges to reading and written composition through the use of whole language activities.

Dorothy Rubin (1990) described the whole language process as having an emphasis on the "wholeness" of things. While there is no pat formula for developing a whole language program, the teacher utilizes the students' writings or literature to teach the language processes. Skills are not taught in isolation. Instead, everything is presented as a whole. In addition, both students and teachers are empowered as they jointly make curriculum decisions about what should be learned and how it should be learned.

The Process of Change

A series of graduate courses, based upon the views of the theorists discussed above, were developed to address the development of whole language knowledge and skills. These courses were offered to the members of the Greenwood Area Consortium which encompasses ten rural school districts in the seven counties. There were several attractive aspects connected with these courses. Tuition fees were underwritten by the school districts who, in turn, were reimbursed by the South Carolina State Department of Education. Teachers could self-select in enrolling in these courses. The classes were scheduled at a convenient time for teachers since they convened at five in the afternoon or were held during inservice days. In addition, teachers could take the information gained during class immediately back to their own classrooms for implementation and experimentation.

The teachers in these rural school districts voiced their concerns about varying degrees of administrative restraint. A few teachers were fortunate enough to have developed full administrative support for their movement toward whole language in their

classrooms. They had developed this support base over a period of several years. The majority of the teachers, however, felt that their power to make curriculum decisions was severely limited by their administrators. Since the teachers in these classes were self-selected, they were evidencing their belief in the viability of the whole language approach for themselves and their students. They were enrolled in these classes to develop their knowledge and skills in whole language. In addition, they found a network which allowed them to identify resource people and materials as well as ideas for gaining administrative and parental support for implementing this language approach. The following sections describe the path taken by these teachers as they searched for ways to meet the needs of at-risk rural students.

Early Childhood Teachers Making the Change

Change is a developmental process and the first step is understanding the need to make a change. As an example, in one of the rural school districts, three kindergarten teachers, six first grade teachers and one fourth grade teacher, with the support of the curriculum director, recognized that a basic skills classroom was not helping children become literate. One of the authors, who has been working primarily in the area of early childhood education, developed a course to guide these same teachers through the change process.

At the time the teachers were experiencing frustration with the basic skills method of teaching, they were also reading about the whole language approach in teacher magazines and journals. Thinking that this approach might have merit, they requested more information on the topic. In response, the curriculum director arranged for several professors of early childhood and elementary education from a nearby university to present workshops to the teachers concerning the theoretical and research bases for the whole language movement. In addition, arrangements were made for the teachers to visit classrooms where the whole language approach was being applied. These events, which occurred during one school year, formed the foundation for the teachers to begin the journey from basic skills to whole language.

Conversion of this kind is a complex process. It is one matter to have the desire and courage to change. It is another to experience the process of change. This requires planning so that the implementation has focus and direction. It was decided that a course in the implementation of whole language would provide the teachers with the knowledge and guidance to implement the process. The curriculum director asked Lander College to create a course that would help interested teachers gradually implement the whole language approach in early childhood classrooms. In addition to regular class meetings, the course would offer a practicum component allowing the professor to periodically visit the classrooms in order to assist teachers with implementation.

The course began with a discussion of the principles of whole language (Mills and Clyde, 1990) with a particular emphasis on whole language as a philosophy, rather than a method or "kit approach" to learning. It was explained to the teachers that this approach influences the way we view children, the presentation of the curriculum, relations with parents and the role of the teacher. It was important, at the very beginning, for teachers to understand that this approach might require them to test beliefs they have held, for most of their teaching careers, about how children learn. It was also emphasized that simply incorporating an array of whole language activities, without the accompanying philosophy, is NOT whole language!

To help the teachers get started, we discussed how to implement some beginning literary activities in their classrooms. Most of the kindergarten and first grade teachers believed they could begin journals using invented spelling, a shared literature event, classroom response circles, class books, language experience stories and a message board. The fourth grade teacher, who had had experience with whole language, added the authoring cycle and written conversation to the above list. Other related topics addressed during that first session were how to manage the whole language classroom, how to assess children's progress using this approach and how to "weave in," or integrate, basic skills.

Before the next class meeting, the professor visited each of the classrooms. As expected, the teachers were all at various stages of beginning whole language. Two first grade teachers had started cautiously with a few whole language activities such as journal writing, writing words to accompany drawings and making a class book. The other first grade teachers began more ambitiously. In addition to the activities listed above, four of the first grade teachers began by creating centers, rearranging the seating arrangement to allow for cooperative grouping, teaching reading through literature and language experience stories and conducting response circles.

In subsequent class sessions, the participants discussed related topics such as the authoring cycle, home school relations, multicultural needs, research on the whole language approach and curriculum webbing. The professor continued with school visits supporting each teacher's individual efforts into whole language.

At the conclusion of the course, four of the ten teachers were successfully operating whole language classrooms. Three of the teachers were combining several whole language activities with basic skills activities. Three others, while using some whole language activities, were still operating basic skills classrooms.

In reviewing the merits of this approach for their children, these early childhood teachers credited whole language with

introducing rural students to a variety of printed materials which they would not normally see. Even more interesting, teachers believe this approach, which gives the classroom an air of informality, meets the cultural learning styles of a rural population. As one teacher wrote, "In a rural community, I don't think students like to be pressured. I think the relaxed and natural environment of a whole language classroom helps them learn better."

This degree of change in schools where building principals are not supportive, where an array of reading materials is absent, and where parents are suspicious of new ideas, is hard to come by. This indeed, is a commentary on the courage and commitment of these early childhood teachers.

Elementary and Middle School Teachers Making the Change

Another one of the authors has taught ten graduate courses during the last five years designed to assist teachers in grades K-8 who wished to develop whole language skills. The actual enrollment consisted of teachers with a range of students from programs for four-year olds through students in area high schools. These teachers brought with them a wide array of knowledge, skills, concerns and biases.

Guidelines for these courses were suggested by the staff of the South Carolina State Department of Education. Individual professors were given great latitude in identifying and developing observational methods for diagnosing and assessing students' needs, identifying the characteristics of rural students as they related to language development, developing whole language skills for both teachers and students, developing effective communication techniques to encourage participation of families, and identifying supportive materials and resource persons.

Teachers enrolled in these classes who had early childhood and elementary preparation and experience were further along in their whole language development than teachers at the intermediate, junior high, and senior high school school levels. This might well be attributed to accepted curriculum practices and administrative support present at the early childhood and elementary levels. Teachers at the intermediate and junior high levels were eager to move toward whole language, but felt that they had more inherent problems and less understanding of the process from administrative levels. Among their perceived problems were accountability for skills development, driven by published school test scores, and their notions of being unable to integrate the whole language process across the curriculum due to administrative practices of grouping and scheduling. High school teachers exhibited similar concerns. In addition, they voiced the opinion that this process approach would be less effective for remedial students than for average and

gifted/advanced students. Teachers at grade four level and above were unconvinced of any purpose for the use of oral literature or storytelling.

As these teachers participated in the activities of the courses, they began to exhibit movement from a traditional stance toward the whole language process. They engaged in the types of activities described in the section dealing with early childhood, adapting them to the appropriate developmental and interest levels of their students.

As the teachers progressed through the courses, changes became obvious. Teachers reported that they were beginning to feel more confident in their own ability to make curriculum decisions. They were less intimidated by the sword of accountability hanging over their heads. They were becoming insightful and adept at teaching skills in the context of literature and social conversation, rather than in isolation through workbook pages. They also shared many instances of being amazed by the cognitive processes of their students and by the imagination and insight initiated by their students when allowed the freedom of thought that whole language is based upon. A new sense of excitement and a higher level of energy began to emerge. Teachers became more open to ideas as they became more comfortable and thus were able to model this openness for their students. The language rich environment began to take shape as teachers shared the power in their classrooms. Genuine, authentic dialogue, both verbal and nonverbal, appeared and was supported in their classrooms. These teachers are using the process in their classrooms as they and their students daily explore the many possibilities afforded through the whole language approach.

Making the Change at the Secondary Level

Just as whole language recognizes and incorporates a developmental approach to language learning, the progress of whole language through the educational levels also seems to be developmental, arriving at the secondary level after being embraced in early childhood programs and in elementary and middle schools. The level which seems most resistant to change is the secondary school, defined here as grades 9-12.

At this point in time, no specific course has been developed to address whole language at the secondary level. However, the following material might provide a foundation for such a course.

As a professor of preservice teachers at the secondary level in the area of content reading and as a supervisor of secondary student teachers in language arts, the third author has had the opportunity to visit many English and reading classrooms over the past four years. Perhaps the most striking observation was the variety of

approaches. The gifted and advanced placement classrooms were in many cases using whole language where students had a voice in what they read, choosing entire works, discussing informally in groups what they were learning, and writing about their questions and discoveries. It was not unusual to find them outside in a wooded area composing original poems as they replicated the conditions under which poets may have written. The college placement classrooms most often were following a traditional approach with one anthology, but at times they also moved toward the philosophy and practice of whole language. The general and lower levels had students with greatest need and those who adapted least well to routine instruction. Yet, it was here that students most often were working individually with basic skills material and worksheets. Reading often involved isolated topics without continuity. There was little discussion and little writing except for completing blanks of skill sheets.

In working with teachers through conducted workshops, the author identified the teachers' desire for alternatives. Their concerns included how to balance creativity in their classrooms with the restrictions of standardized testing requirements, curriculum requirements, and Carnegie Unit restrictions.

The solution at the secondary level would appear to involve two types of change. First, teachers need to be introduced to the whole language approach as an alternative. While many would be receptive, they do not know how to begin. One prohibitive problem is that the teachers themselves are not familiar with available literature. They need to begin with graduate courses or with literature reading exchanges which would allow them to become familiar with resources on many levels and of many types. Next, they need to work with new delivery systems involving grouping and cooperative learning. Writing needs to become an integral part of learning and should be an outgrowth of reading and discussion. Discussion among students and teachers (not the asking and answering of questions) must become an accepted part of the secondary classroom. If it is true that the average student asks one question per month (Rowe, 1972), critical thinking skills and the ability to articulate ideas must be put back into secondary classrooms through discussion. One other aspect of the whole language approach is direct experience. Many rural and disadvantaged students have difficulty in classrooms because they have not had the prerequisite experiences necessary for building backgrounds.

Required teacher expertise can best be built through sustained learning such as a course or series of workshops that build observation, illustration, and feedback into the structure. Brief "how to" staff development programs cannot be the vehicles for such change.

The second aspect of change must come at the administrative level. There must be administrative attitudes that will support

changes in teaching methods and delivery systems so necessary in a whole language approach. There must be financial resources for teacher training, direct student experiences, and additional reading materials. There must be time without pressure about test scores while we re-engage rural at-risk students in interesting learning. There may need to be deregulation of schools which would allow flexibility in scheduling blocks of time for integrated learning. With the current crisis in drop-outs in schools, the secondary school might be the level most in need of the whole learning approach to literacy.

Making the Change at the College level

In the 1989-90 academic year, a core of faculty members, many of whom had been involved in writing across the curriculum as a means of improving the language skills of students at Lander College, became concerned about the entire spectrum of language skills of the student body. Since the majority of these students are residents of this rural area, oral language was one of the issues of greatest concern. The Vice President for Academic Affairs appointed a communications committee to study the problem and make recommendations. The committee developed a survey which was sent to the entire faculty concerning the perceived level of language skills of their students. Of the forty-three faculty members who responded, thirty-three said that their students showed deficiencies and the remaining ten said that some of their students showed deficiencies. The types of problems noted were in organizing and articulating thought, in conventions in standard English, and in experience in "adult talk."

Solutions ranged from blaming the high schools and homes to saying that there was no solution. Some faculty thought that the English Department should have the solution; some thought that it was everybody's problem. Individual approaches included ignoring the problem, marking errors, and intensive remediation.

Several conclusions did come from the work of the committee. There was and is definitely a problem, largely growing out of the communication patterns of the rural areas from which students come. The solution would not be a quick or simple one; it must come from the combined efforts of many.

In the School of Education, a whole language course has been proposed to begin to address the issues. Classes would be small, containing no more than fifteen students. The emphasis would be on improving all communication skills, in a whole language approach. Students would select materials of personal interest to read. Professors also would have a large variety of suggested readings just to get students started in the process. The list would include fiction, nonfiction, journal articles, biographies, films, and tapes. The emphasis would be on developing the receiving skills of

reading and listening. Students would react to their reading and viewing through many types of writing, including journals. They would also respond through discussion and impromptu talks to the groups. Through videotapes, students would see and hear themselves. Learning logs would provide a record of patterns of errors that students make and examples of how to eliminate these. The environment would be one of acceptance and comfort where students would be allowed to focus on topics and materials of their choice which would relate to their major. The primary purpose would be to help students strengthen both abilities and confidence in all areas of communication. Such a whole language approach would make use of the natural ways in which individuals acquire language skills while recognizing and respecting the interests and individuality of learners at every level. The expectation would be that the whole language approach would prove as effective with adult learners as it has with younger children.

Summary

The authors are in agreement with Ken Goodman (1986) when he states that "We're a long way from where we should be" (p. 59). The movement from a traditional program to a whole language approach is just beginning in these rural schools. Lander College is playing a leading role in this developmental change by offering whole language courses to teachers in a manner that supports the context in which they teach. All of us are in the process of becoming whole language teachers in whole language environments. The process is on-going. Gordon Allport (1955) would remind us that all of life is the process of becoming.

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